

## THE BIRTH OF LIGHTNING

(LAOS)

*This wonderful little story anchors a great theme of many eastern religions: One evolves to true happiness—often over many lifetimes—by learning the value of generosity and by nurturing a willingness to celebrate life through selfless acts. Note how at the end the beautiful young maiden goes off with a wrinkled old man, choosing her partner not by his physical appeal, but by the quality of his heart. This is the point of early versions of “Cinderella”; the prince doesn’t think twice about trying the glass slipper on a disheveled-looking hand-maiden (in fact, Cinderella), proving he’s driven by a quest for inner, not outer, beauty.*



LONG AGO THERE LIVED a noble chief with ten wives, whose greatest pleasure in the world was to lay feasts for the poor. “You are an honorable man,” the priests would tell him. “Surely you will be happy in the next life.” While nine of the chief’s wives saw the wisdom of such generosity—of “making merit,” as it’s often called—the tenth wife, the woman the chief adored most, wanted nothing to do with any of it.

In time those lives came to an end, as all life must, and on passing, the chief and the nine generous wives took their place in the heavens. But try as he might, the chief could not forget his favorite wife; most days would find him high in

the clouds with looking glass in hand, scouting the far reaches of earth for some sign of her. One bright morning he was searching the shore of a remote lake, and lo and behold, there she was—she'd been reincarnated as a beautiful crane—walking along the edge of a marsh, looking for food. Then the chief did an amazing thing. Wanting to test the heart of his former wife, he changed himself into a fish and drifted over to where she was feeding. At first the crane pecked at the fish, but on realizing that it was alive, she turned away, even though she was terribly hungry. It was because she refused to take life, even though she was hungry, that the old chief knew her heart was good.

Not long after her life as a crane ended, the woman returned as the girl child of a humble gardener, and over the years grew to be as wise and fair as any woman in the land. When she reached marriage age, her parents threw a wonderful feast, during which they presented their daughter with a wreath of the finest flowers. "Toss this wreath into the air," her mother said, "and on whatever man's head it lands, that one shall be your husband."

Now unknown to anyone—for how could they suspect such a thing?—her former husband was at that feast, come to earth in the form of an old man. To everyone's horror, when the maiden closed her eyes and tossed the wreath high into the air, it was on his wrinkled, hairless head that it landed. "This can't be!" her father shouted. "The wreath must be thrown again!" His daughter, however, thought otherwise. She walked over to the old man, placed her hand in his, and together they rose into the sky. The girl's father was so outraged that he ran to the house, grabbed

his gun, and tried to shoot the old man down!

Today when heat lightning flashes in the skies above Laos, the people may point and bid you to see that it is really the old man flashing his spotting scope across the earth, searching for his wife. Likewise, when spears of lightning strike at the forests, they may laugh and tell you it's nothing, just that foolish gardener, shooting at the old man who came to the feast and married his precious daughter. D